

Three Perspectives on Ethnography from Ukraine: The Mysterious Tale of a Lost Hutsul Manuscript, Its Recovery, and the Dialogues that Ensued

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At the historic meeting of folklorists, ethnographers and ethnomusicologists on the 70th anniversary of the founding of the Department of Ukrainian Folklore at Ivan Franko University in L'viv, Ukraine, old and new models of scholarship clashed, in ways both subtle and fierce. Generations of Ukrainian scholars, in addition to three representatives from the U.S. (myself included) took part in the meeting.¹ Papers ranged from analyses in the Soviet formalist folklore style—now reinvented as the nationalist Ukrainian style—to papers exploring the archives and biographies of founders of the discipline in Ukraine (including Filaret Kolessa, after whom the department is named). Topics discussed also revealed generational rifts in what constituted valid terrain for folklore studies: when some young scholars tackled subjects such as how mass e-mail love notes can be considered modern folklore, or explored the humorous texts of Ukrainian-Canadian *kolomyjky* (rural Western Ukrainian dance songs) that have a vibrant second life in the diaspora, their papers would often be met with pointed questions about intellectual worth from the elders of the field, accusations of irreverence or irrelevance coquettishly or ironically rebutted by younger presenters.

Observing this dynamic, along with the nationalist zeal expressed by a sizable number of career folklorists, I noted the difference from the much more neutral tone of conferences in the United States, where intellectual dialogue very rarely seems to escalate to the sputtering pitch that characterized much of the L'vivan conference. The impassioned attitudes towards the vitality of the discipline and its meaning for Ukraine as a viable country called to mind Mark von Hagen's analysis of the state of Ukrainian historiography and the re-emergence of Ukrainian history as an academic discipline when he asked "Does Ukraine Have a History?" Von Hagen argued that Ukraine will "need a civic, patriotic history of its nation-state," but that the content of that history would be ferociously debated. And furthermore, as post-socialist Ukrainian history and historiography develops, it will serve as a "laboratory" in which "the nation-state's conceptual hegemony" can be challenged (von Hagen 1995: 673). Similarly, today the

various disciplines that claim folklore in their purview—ethnomusicology, philology, ethnography, and, to a smaller extent, the institutionally marginalized fields of anthropology or "*kulturolohia*" (culturology)—contest the common intellectual terrain they inhabit on grounds both methodological and ideological.

These epistemological debates about value came into stark relief at the conference in L'viv, where three distinct perspectives on ethnography and ethnographic authority commingled: first, that of the the professional experts in the fields of folklore in Ukraine; second, my own, U.S. anthropology-inflected perspective (with all the concomitant reflexive positioning of myself as a member of the Ukrainian diaspora in the U.S., an ethnomusicology Ph.D. student and an ethnographer studying Ukraine)²; and third, the vantage points of two Hutsul "native ethnographers," one the subject of my paper, the other, a Hutsul man studying the same subject as the one I had addressed. Before moving to the story of the remarkable manuscript that is the pivot in this schema of interacting ethnographic perspectives, I will provide a brief historical context for the divergent and sometimes contradictory ethnographic traditions that make up this triad.

On Ethnographic Authority and Ethnomusicology in Ukraine

The disciplines of socio-cultural anthropology and, by association, ethnomusicology in the West have experienced a sea change in approaches and attitudes in recent decades, and the issue of the ethnographer's authority has been a central question in this upheaval. The post-colonial critique of anthropology and the social sciences pointed its finger at the colonialist, paternalistic, and ethnocentric origins of these disciplines, and the eruption of reactions that followed in U.S. and European academia ranged from profound to defensive, apologetic to deeply reflexive (Abu-Lughod 1991; Behar and Gordon 1995; Clifford, Marcus, and School of American Research

1. One of the US presenters took part via Skype video conference from Houston, Texas.

2. As a teenager in the mid-1990s, I began to make solo trips to Ukraine, and went on my first team ethnomusicological expedition in 1999 with a group from the L'viv Conservatory.

1986; Sanjek 1990). Ethnomusicologist Steven Feld proposed the strategy of “dialogic editing” to confront the issue of the ethnographer’s authoritative impunity (Feld 1987), when he brought his published ethnography back to the Kaluli of Papa New Guinea for their opinions and critique. Feld’s authority was subjected to the represented population’s authority, who then made their own role in the political act of constructing and representing subjects and stories (c.f. Jackson 1995). In a place like Ukraine, with its own firmly entrenched tradition of scholarship, an ethnographer dedicated to “dialogic editing” can choose to engage with the native population as well as to a third editing party: the professional experts in the local urban scholarly community.

Ukrainian ethnomusicology or folklore studies is a tradition of ethnography and analysis that has been, implicitly or explicitly, bound up in nationalist or essentialist dogma (Filenko 2001; Helbig 2005; Wanner 1996). Rooted in Herderian nostalgia and Romantic striving for the authentic “soul of the folk,” transmuted through the confusing push-and-pull of Soviet formulae for socialist folklore, and now reinvented in the first tumultuous era of Ukrainian independence, contemporary Ukrainian ethnomusicological scholarship either goes so deep into formal structural analysis that it is impenetrable to outsiders, or becomes so explicitly political that any

claims towards objectivity are sullied. With the recent resurgence of xenophobic Ukrainian nationalism in its western regions, such polemical scholarship, affirmative of old models of nationalist-essentialist thought, despite the entirely different current political reality of Ukraine, will only further cleave contemporary Ukrainian society and reinforce the overly simplistic political rhetoric that pits fervent Western Ukrainian nationalists (*Banderivtsi*) against Russian chauvinists (*Moskal’i*) in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine.

In post-Soviet Ukrainian ethnomusicology, professionals train by mastering rural repertoires and developing an ability to formalize, systematize and contextualize folk music along the indigenous guidelines of village rituals and beliefs. Given the piddling budgets allocated for this kind of research, Ukrainian ethnomusicologists generally study the “ethnographic regions” closest to their urban universities: L’vivan scholars focus on the Western Ukrainian groups such as Boykos, Lemkos, and Hutsuls; Kharkivan scholars focus on Eastern Ukrainian populations; Kyivans study Podilians and other Central Ukrainian “ethnographic groups.” Expeditions into the field are generally conducted over weekends or during weeks in the summer, and usually involve teams of researchers and students setting up camp in a village and fanning out in pairs or trios to



Ruslana and her “Wild Dancers” at Eurovision.

find the eldest musicians in the community. The practice of extended fieldwork that marks ethnomusicology in the United States is not widely practiced.

In L'viv, ethnomusicologists conduct their interviews with musicians based on a checklist that runs through all of the possible ritual songs and cycles that local musicians may know. The checklist emphasizes “ancient” and “authentic” music: Soviet, contemporary or original songs do not make it onto the list. In the highly systematized task of preserving “authentic” musical repertoires and rituals that are perceived to be threatened or dying, the power of each individual researcher to interpret ethnographic data is limited by the overarching project of the collective, thereby, in some ways, skirting the question of ethnographic authority on an individual level. The all-encompassing project to salvage dying music, the central mission of Ukrainian folklore, does, however, bring an implicit set of assumptions about what kinds of music are valid and valuable (“authentic” and “forgotten” being at the top of the hierarchy, “original songs” and “Soviet era songs” at the bottom). Furthermore, formal interactions between ethnographers and song-carriers generally conform to the limited formula prescribed by the checklist and the specific question of the research—usually a variation on the question “what is the oldest and purest song of the specific sought-after genre?”

My own ethnographic research in Ukraine adhered to the model generally practiced in the United States. On a series of grants, I had the opportunity to live for extended periods in the communities that I studied. In addition to structured and systematic interviews, serendipity played a sizeable role in steering my research, and “deep hanging out” in informal gatherings resulted in some of my most compelling insights. My ethnomusicological interest in the Hutsuls centers on the ways that contemporary Ukrainian popular musicians look towards Hutsul culture as a kind of authentic folk id to the urban post-colonial Western Ukrainian superego. This stereotypical image of Hutsuls as the “wild” ethnic Ukrainians of the Carpathian mountains has had the biggest impact as a result of Ruslana’s *Wild Dances*, which won the Eurovision grand prize in 2004, though numerous lesser known bands such as Haydamaky, Perkalaba, Gutsul Kalypso, Shokolad, and Drymba da Dzyga invoke Hutsul themes and imagery that construct variations on the theme of indigenous Ukrainian “wildness” as well.

These kinds of “wildness” are articulated not only through the proliferation of music that trades on such stereotypes, but also through the marketing of DVDs such as the “Wisdom of the Carpathian Shaman (*Mol'far*)” that follows the last surviving Hutsul shaman as he heals and casts spells, and the elaborate repertoire of “*anekdoty*” (jokes) about Hutsul “wildness.” All these forms of stereotyping and marketing of “wildness”

come from outside the Hutsul community: it is a newer formation of the old urban gaze onto the rural, analogous to the tired ethnomusicological paradigm that unproblematically imposes Western classical norms of transcription and description onto a music that confounds many basic principles of mode, meter, instrument design, and arrangement. For this reason, it was exceptional to come across, during my fieldwork in Verkhovyna, the remarkable manuscript written by an early twentieth-century Hutsul “native ethnographer” and activist whose work for over fifty years had been thought lost, and who was largely unknown to the professionals in L'viv.

The Remarkable Manuscript and the Native Ethnographer's Voice

Summarizing the achievements of his friend and collaborator, Petro Shekeryk-Donykiv, the renowned Polish ethnographer, and writer Stanislaw Vincenz (1888-1971) commented that “he was a talented person, if not a genius, and he made a work that, if they someday dig it up, will be the pride of native writing and a monument to the old language, to which there is no parallel” (quoted by Zelenchuk 2007 and Arsenych 2009). After nearly fifty years, the work to which Vincenz had referred was finally, and quite literally, dug up—physically exhumed from the soil, dusted off, wiped clean by the author’s daughter—and presented to the editorial staff at Hutsulshchynna, the local press of the isolated Carpathian mountain town of Verkhovyna. In 2007, this small press released the forgotten magnum opus of the little-known author named Petro Shekeryk-Donykiv, who perished in the Soviet gulag in the early 1940s.

The remarkable history of this manuscript, published for the first time nearly half a century after the death of its author, is exceptional for the unlikelihood of its survival, but also disturbingly familiar as an example of the countless erasures attempted or accomplished by the Soviet regime. Three weeks after the last page of the loosely-autobiographical book was dated by Shekeryk-Donykiv (April 20, 1940), he was arrested by the NKVD and deported to Siberia, never to be heard from again. For the remainder of her life, his wife Paraska swore that his manuscripts, including the novel that was his masterpiece, had been destroyed. In truth, she and her daughter Anna buried the works, moving them occasionally, until “better times” came. Finally, in 1999, eight years after Ukraine declared independence from the Soviet Union, Anna brought the manuscript to the editors of the Hutsulshchynna press in Verkhovyna, and they re-assembled the novel from the partly-destroyed, partly-decayed original manuscript. The novel was finally published in 2007; the following year, the same press released the collected works of Shekeryk-Donykiv, titled



Петро Шекерик-Доників

Petro Shekeryk-Donykiv

“A Year in the Ritual Life of the Hutsuls” (Shekeryk-Donykiv 2009, Shekeryk-Donykiv 2007).

Due to the limited number of copies published and the obscure and antiquated dialect in which the bulk of his work is written, the recently published materials of Shekeryk-Donykiv have had a limited impact in Ukraine. His work was, however, frequently cited as an important source material by Hutsul friends and informants during my fieldwork in Verkhovyna in the winter and spring of 2009. During the January 2009 winter holidays in Verkhovyna, my hosts would read aloud from *Dido Ivanchyk* to make sure they followed the correct Christmas dining procedures according to “old-world” Hutsul ritual. When all of the guests at the holy Christmas dinner were asked to climb under the food-laden table in turn, to shake its legs and shoo away demons, it was at Shekeryk-Donykiv’s instruction. The book triggered a long-suppressed memory for the elderly matriarch, and, for the first time in decades, she carried freshly-baked loaves of braided bread into the snowy night to offer it to that year’s deceased, as her mother had done in the 1930s.

My particular interest in Shekeryk-Donykiv centers on the impact of his work in reinstating forgotten rituals and kindling contemporary pride in ancient local custom, and extends to the importance of his role as a native ethnographer in a borderland on the periphery of various colonial urban loci of scholarship. Shekeryk-Donykiv’s fundamental faith in the coherence of his native people’s culture provides a counterpoint to the many better-known exoticized and romanticized literary and ethnographic accounts of Hutsul life by colonial and Ukrainian intellectuals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Kotsiubynsky 1981, Shukhevych 1899-1908, Ukraïnka 1973, Vincenz 1955, Witwicki 1873). For anthropologists of the Western tradition who have been concerned with the fundamental crisis of ethnographic authority in the wake of post-colonial critique, the discovery of a voice such as Shekeryk-Donykiv’s is doubly interesting, because it provides an example of a “native ethnographer” from an era when “ethnography” in the United States was still in its very nascent formation. The evidence provided by a native ethnographer whose work was untouched by the Soviet censorship regime and unfiltered through contemporary post-colonial politics, offers a truly rare glimpse of the world which Shekeryk-Donykiv inhabited.

Petro Shekeryk-Donykiv was an extraordinary man born into extremely humble conditions in the mountain village of Holove near Zhab’ye (renamed Verkhovyna in the Soviet 1960s) in 1889. He completed four years of primary school education in Holove. His teacher, Luka Harmatij, encouraged Shekeryk-Donykiv, his favorite student, to document his ethnographic observations, and presented him with a copy of Taras Shevchenko’s *Kobzar* (the foundational text in Romantic Ukrainian

literature and politics), which had a big impact on the small boy. Through his teacher, Shekeryk-Donykiv became acquainted with many of the urban literati of the day—luminaries such as Ivan Franko, Hnat Khotkevych, Mykhailo Kotsiubynskij, Volodymyr Shukhevych—when they came to the mountains for respite or inspiration, and whom Shekeryk-Donykiv assisted in their folklore collecting endeavors.

During World War I, Shekeryk-Donykiv served in the Austrian army, where he agitated for the rights of Ukrainianspeakers and encouraged his countrymen to take pride in the language and culture of Ukraine, despite its changing status as the colony of various shifting empires. His physical maturation came hand-in-hand with his full-bodied and outspoken nationalism, and upon returning to his native land after the war, he actively participated in numerous social, cultural and political movements: the First Hutsul Theater company in Krasnoilya, the public educational and literacy organization Prosvita (Danilenko n.d.), the Ukrainian Nationalist Party (eventually as an elected deputy to its Rada in the 1930s), etc. He also worked tirelessly to combat illiteracy among the Hutsuls and was the founder and the chief editor of the annual *Hutsul'skij Kalendar* [Hutsul Calendar] which exists to this day. He was a prolific writer who published over 106 works about the lives and beliefs of the Hutsuls in the 1920-30s, in presses as far-reaching as Warsaw.

Dido Ivanchyk, Shekeryk-Donykiv’s novel about the life of a Hutsul man, is written in the *starovitzkij* (lit. “old world”) Hutsul dialect. The story includes invaluable detail about the yearly rituals that marked life in the pre-Soviet Carpathian Mountains in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including the complex intermarriage of pagan and animist beliefs with colonial forms of Christianity. This blurring of belief systems drives much of the action in the novel and results in a text that one reviewer referred to, anachronistically perhaps, as a self-consciously literary “magical realism.” The collected works contain short essays in a folkloric-ethnographic vein, personal memoirs (including a history of the first Hutsul theater that Shekeryk-Donykiv assisted Hnat Khotkevych in founding and running), short stories based on local lore and legend, detailed explanation of the cyclical rituals and beliefs of the Hutsuls, opinion pieces, and humorous writings. Both works also contain rich descriptions of the role of music in the daily and spiritual lives of the Hutsuls, as a force for calling together the supernatural and the terrestrial through sound. As the bridge between the alternate belief systems of paganism and Christianity, music often serves to blend and blur the distinctions between animist and religious aspects of Hutsul faith in Shekeryk-Donykiv’s work. Music is seen as a natural force that is god-given to selected (male) members of the community, special individuals who may

possess mystical powers, such as the ability to manipulate the weather or create a trance in others through melody, sound, or vibration.

Shekeryk-Donykiv writes with a Hutsul voice (and in the Hutsul dialect) that pre-dates the Soviet imposition of politically-charged ethnography. With its rich descriptions of musical belief systems in the Hutsul worldview, his writing provides an instructive counterpoint from these outsider perspectives, and introduces the complex belief system that urbanites practicing a state-sanctioned version of religion would have identified as regressive and “wild.” As an example of a truly “native ethnographer,” Shekeryk-Donykiv’s account of Hutsul life and ritual adds complexity to his authority as an interpreter of and expert on Hutsul life. It is a familiar conundrum for those who have reflected on the quintessential “outsiderness” of the individual who seeks to describe and interpret culture via the written word—even as a cultural insider. For an ethnographer like myself, such an authoritative voice from the past summons questions about the complex matrix of factors that Shekeryk-Donykiv must have weighed as he wrote the ethnography of his own people. How should I, the contemporary ethnographer, account for his biases as an insider with a political agenda? How does his ethnographic authority challenge or complement my own?

Coda: The Native Ethnographer’s Ethnographers

In mid-October 2009, in the week following the conference, I traveled back to Verkhovyna and met with Vasyl Zelenchuk from the village of Kyvorivnia. Zelenchuk had completed his undergraduate degree in philology at Ivan Franko University in L’viv in the early 1990s, but “fled back to the mountains” because city life felt confining to him. In Verkhovyna, he stood out as the local expert on Shekeryk-Donykiv, and assembled the dictionary of Hutsul terms that accompanied the publication of *Dido Ivanchyk*. As an undergraduate, he had studied demonology in the Hutsul belief system and was captivated by the figure of Shekeryk-Donykiv. He “knew in his heart” that the manuscript of *Dido Ivanchyk* still existed, and, in the late 1990s, he was the first to make a public announcement that the manuscript had been found. Zelenchuk assisted and guided the work’s restoration through its publication in 2007. Zelenchuk’s excitement about his research was contagious as he repeatedly mentioned his joy at meeting another individual interested in Shekeryk-Donykiv (and from America!). We sat at a small cafe table as I sipped the tea that I had ordered before he arrived and an hour flew by before we realized that, in his excitement, he had not paused to order a hot beverage, despite the fact that he

had come in soaked from a rainstorm.

I asked him about popular depictions of Hutsuls in Ukraine, and he commented on the “wildness” stereotype and the multiple reactions of Hutsuls to Ruslana’s depiction (his village, Kryvorivnia, had spearheaded the attempt to boycott the album in Ukraine, expressing outrage at the term “wild” in the album title, though he was not involved). As we talked about representation of Hutsuls in popular music and ethnography, he revealed his extremely nuanced feelings about it: on the one hand, it’s good to raise awareness of our existence, on the other hand, we don’t deserve slander. He acknowledged the ambivalence of his own feelings on the subject of demonology, saying, “I know our superstitious beliefs are irrational, but some part of me still wants to and chooses to believe it.” He emphasized his commitment to speak his Hutsul dialect, though he admitted to shifting his language toward standard Ukrainian to communicate with me (though his speech was still heavily speckled with Hutsul words and his pronunciation was unmistakably Hutsul). We talked over key scenes in the recently published works of Shekeryk-Donykiv, and he offered interpretations of nuances that I had struggled to grasp.

Finally, it was time to face the rain again. As we stood up from the cafe table, Zelenchuk told me that our meeting had so energized him that he was impatient to return home to Shekeryk-Donykiv and maybe write a few pages himself. After we had parted, as I braced against the downpour with a flimsy umbrella, I considered the value of dialogue in the ethnographic process, the back-and-forth of simple conversation, the force of exchange in molding the texts that ethnographers make as we form our questions and assemble them in patterns that attempt to make some sense of the world. And in this very real, very current desire to deepen our knowledge, I marveled that an almost lost, nearly destroyed, ethnographer’s voice could still induce such momentum—contained as it may be, but kinetic nonetheless—in the world.

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